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THE TRUE LESSON OF PROTESTANTISM.

SINCE the day when Martin Luther posted his audacious heresies on the church-door at Wittenberg, a great change has come over men's minds, the full significance of which is even yet but rarely comprehended. To inquire into the nature of this change, and into what we may perhaps call its ultimate tendency, is well worth our while, whether as students of history or as students of philosophy. In outward aspect, the results of Protestantism have come to be very different to-day from what they were at first. The immediate consequence of Luther's successful revolt was the formation of a great number of little churches, each with its creed as clean-cut and as thoroughly dried as the creed of the great church from which they had separated, each making practically the same assumption of absolute infallibility, each laying down an intellectual assent to sundry transcendental dogmas as an exclusive condition of salvation. This formation of new sects has gone on down to the present time, and there is no reason why it should not continue in future; but the period when educated men, of great and original powers, could take part in work of this sort has gone by forever. The foremost men are no longer heresiarchs; they are free-thinkers, each on his own account; and the formation of new sects is something which in the future is likely to be more and more confined to ignorant or half-educated classes of people. At the present day it is not the formation of new sects, but the decomposition of the old ones, that is the conspicuous phenomenon inviting our attention. The latter half of the nineteenth century will be known to the future historian as especially the era of the decomposition of orthodoxies. People, as a rule, do not now pass over from one church into another, but they remain in their own churches while modifying their theological opinions, and in this way the orthodoxy of every church

is gradually but surely losing its consistency. Nor is it only the laymen of whom this can be said; for the clergy every now and then set them the example. An eminent Congregationalist minister in Connecticut, some few years since, was asked why he did not go over to the Unitarians, inasmuch as he not only kept Strauss and Renan in his library, but even loaned them to young men, and publicly eulogized Herbert Spencer, and went so far one day as to take part in the dedication of a Jewish synagogue. The quaint and shrewd reply was: "I am unable to see why the Unitarians should enjoy a monopoly of all the free-thinking; I prefer to carry my candle where it is darkest!" It is only four or five years since a learned English bishop completed his voluminous commentary on the Pentateuch, in which the sacred text is handled with as much freedom as Mr. Paley shows in dealing with the Homeric poems, or Mr. Grote in expounding the dialogues of Plato. And the history of this, as of other less conspicuous acts of heresy, seems to show that practically an Anglican divine may preach whatever doctrine he likes—provided, doubtless, that he avoid certain obnoxious catch-words. Among Unitarians this doctrinal latitude is too well known to require any illustration. Yet it is well not to forget that, forty years ago, Theodore Parker was virtually driven out of the Unitarian Church for saying the same sort of things which may be heard to-day from half the Unitarian pulpits in New England.

In view of all this, it is not strange if we are sometimes led to ask, What is to be the final outcome of this decomposition of orthodoxies? The total destruction of religious creeds was long ago predicted by Catholic controversialists as an inevitable result of the exercise of that right of private judgment which is the fundamental principle of Protestantism; and now it begins to look as if the Catholic prediction were likely to be fulfilled, although Protestant churches have warmly resented the imputation, and have too often taken pains to show that in strait and uncompromising bigotry they could vie with their great antagonist. While Catholics, on the one hand, have foretold this result by way of warning and opprobrium, on the other hand it has been no less confidently predicted by atheists, materialists, and positivists by way of encouragement and approval. To Comte the chaos of opinion which prevails in modern society afforded proof that the time was ripe for discarding theology and metaphysics altogether, and for confining the operations of the human

mind hereafter to the simple content of observed facts. To Dr. Büchner and his friends it presages the speedy advent of that glorious millennium when all men shall felicitate themselves upon the prospect of dying like the beasts of the field. On the one side and on the other we hear it maintained, with equal emphasis, that any system of Protestantism—any system which seeks to combine absolute freedom of speculation with an essentially religious attitude of mind—is logically absurd, and is destined to be superseded. The only question is as to what alternative is to survive the inevitable fate of all such misguided attempts; and here Dr. Büchner and the Pope will be found to disagree. While on the one hand it is held that the course of modern philosophic thought is so distinctly toward materialism that every one who is not a materialist is behind the age, on the other hand it is prophesied that, out of sheer weariness of the skepticism that is the perpetual outcome of free inquiry, there will eventually be brought about a renaissance of the ages of faith. I do not know that it can be said precisely how far these expectations go. Probably it is not expected that crusades or pilgrimages to Compostella will again become fashionable in the complex industrial society of the future; perhaps it is not expected that leaders of scientific thought will accept the miracle of St. Januarius, for the Catholic Church has oftentimes known how to be judiciously lax about such matters; but there is no doubt a vague expectation that, in spite of the independence of thought which scientific studies are fostering, a line will somehow be drawn beyond which men shall agree to submit their judgment to that of the church. It is not Catholics only who make this tacit assumption: it is made, in one form or another, by every one who argues that his own particular orthodoxy is destined to survive the shocks of scientific skepticism; and it underlies the remark which we sometimes hear, that all would be well if men of science would only keep their place and not encroach upon the province of the theologian. The alternative, then, is, when stated as broadly as possible, Will the present decomposition of beliefs be succeeded by a period of reconstruction in which the teachings of some church shall be accepted as authoritative concerning questions of a purely religious nature, or will the decomposition go on until the last vestige of recognition of religious questions shall have vanished, and all educated men shall have become atheistic materialists? It is my object in the present paper to show that no

such alternative really confronts us; that the very propounding of such a question involves grave philosophical and historical errors; that neither materialism on the one hand, nor any species of ecclesiastical orthodoxy on the other hand, is likely to become prevalent in the future; and that the maintenance of an essentially religious attitude of mind is compatible with absolute freedom of speculation on all subjects, whether scientific or metaphysical.

In my apprehension it is a very serious mistake, though a very common one, to suppose that the tendency of modern philosophic thought is toward materialism. On this subject there is a great confusion of ideas, which is aggravated by a general uncertainty as to just what materialism really is. The word "materialism" has been so commonly used in a vituperative rather than a descriptive sense, that it has become somewhat damaged for philosophical purposes. Whenever Auguste Comte had to deal with some opinion which he did not like,—it made little or no difference what it was about,—he used to get rid of it without delay by calling it "metaphysical." And in like manner the word "materialism" has come to be with orthodox ministers a general term of abuse for anything which they do not happen to like. I was once called (in print) a materialist, for saying that there are no trustworthy dates in Greek history prior to the first Olympiad! Mr. Joseph Cook, if my memory serves me, declares explicitly that he calls all persons materialists who do not believe in the freedom of the will—which, of course, would have included Jonathan Edwards. Then, besides this silly use of language, the word has undergone some legitimate historical changes of meaning. The great Dr. Priestley, whose theism was quite unimpeachable, avowed himself a materialist, because he did not regard it as beyond the power of an omnipotent Creator to endow matter with the capacity for feeling and thinking. It seems to me that this was a mental attitude much more devout, if not more philosophical, than that of those modern theologians who vie with the ancient Gnostics in heaping abuse upon poor blind, brute, senseless, inert "matter." But Priestley was by no means a materialist in the sense in which that word is correctly used in philosophic discussion to-day. It is not merely in the vocabulary of theological abuse that the terms materialism and atheism are closely associated; the opinions which they connote are really linked together

in many ways. In former times it was customary to stigmatize the colossal generalizations of astronomers and geologists as "atheistical," because they substituted divine action through natural law for divine action through supernatural fiat, which had hitherto been commonly regarded as the only conceivable kind of divine action. Nowadays, as cultivated minds are beginning to surmount this old difficulty, the bugbear springs up in a new quarter. Now that we have begun to study psychology after a scientific method, and to derive valuable assistance from the investigation of nerve-cells and nerve-fibers, and now that we have begun to apply to these studies the profoundest generalizations of physics and chemistry concerning the behavior of molecules of matter, we hear so much talk about undulations and discharges and nervous connections that many worthy people seem to be afraid of seeing it proved that we have really no psychical life at all. They are afraid that the human soul will by and by be wholly resolved into an affair of molecules and undulations and unstable equilibria, and so forth; and accordingly all speculations even remotely savoring of physiological psychology, or of the correlation of vital with inorganic motions, are forthwith stigmatized as "materialistic." Even the Darwinian theory of the origin of species is said to be materialistic by implication, inasmuch as it is supposed at some point to derive the human soul from the psychical part of a brute animal, and at some other point to derive the psychical part of the brute animal from something that is not psychical. The common reproach aimed at all such speculations is that in one way or another, either directly or by implication, they all tend toward the interpretation of psychical life as a temporary or evanescent condition of matter, and thus in reality banish soul from the universe. The association in the popular mind between materialism and atheism is here obvious enough, and is easily justified. Philosophical materialism holds that matter and the motions of matter make up the sum total of existence, and that what we know as psychical phenomena in man and other animals are to be interpreted in an ultimate analysis as simply the peculiar aspect which is assumed by certain enormously complicated motions of matter. This is, I believe, a strictly correct description of materialism, as it was held in the eighteenth century by La Mettrie, and as it is held by Büchner to-day. Whoever holds such views as these concerning the rela-

tions of matter and spirit may be properly called a materialist, and no doubt there are many educated people who hold such views, but that the general tendency of modern philosophic thought is toward the adoption of materialism as thus defined, I emphatically deny. On the contrary, it seems to me that the course of modern philosophy is distinctly in the opposite direction, and that materialism is hopelessly behind the age, so that it argues a much more superficial mind and a much more imperfect education to agree with Büchner to-day than to have agreed with La Mettrie a hundred years ago.

Bear in mind that, before a philosopher can be correctly charged with materialism, it is absolutely necessary that he should hold that psychical phenomena—such as love and hate, or the sensation of redness, or the idea of virtue—are interpretable in terms of matter and motion. Nothing short of this will do. It is not enough that he should hold that, along with every emotion, or sensation, or idea, there goes on a change in nerve-tissue which is probably resolvable into some form of undulatory motion; for this is but an amplification of what we all begin by admitting when we admit that during the present life there is no consciousness except where there is nerve-tissue. If it is materialism to say that for every association of ideas there is established a system of paths for discharges between two or more groups of nerve-cells, it is equally materialism to say that a pint of Scotch whiskey will make a man drunk. The former statement enters very much more into detail than the latter, but there is no other essential difference between them. I do not wonder, however, that people's minds are often vague and confused on these points, for our every-day talk is full of materialistic implications. We say, for example, that grief makes us weep, and the statement is true enough for ordinary purposes; but, in reality, it is not the grief that acts upon the tear-glands. The grief is something absolutely immaterial, something absolutely outside the circuit of physical causation. How do we know this? How do we reach such a conclusion? We reach it by applying to the subject the conception of the correlation of forces, and the conception of the atomic constitution of matter,—twin conceptions which lie at the bottom of all our modern scientific reasoning. The material world is all made up of systems of atoms that are perpetually moving in relation to one another. In an ultimate analysis, every material object is such a system of moving atoms.

Every living organism is a system of systems of such atoms, in myriad-fold orders of composition, and with movements definitely coördinated in myriad-fold degrees of complexity. Now, all the motion that goes into any organism, latent in the air which it breathes and the food which it assimilates, must come out again as motion, and what comes out must be the exact equivalent of what goes in. This is what the doctrine of the correlation of forces means when applied to the living organism and to the nervous system. It means, too, that if we were able to trace in detail the career of any given quantity of atomic motion between the times of its entering and its leaving the organism, we should find through all its innumerable transformations an exact equivalence preserved. But this means that the motion must always be a motion of material particles,—something that can be quantitatively measured. Once introduce into the circuit something that does not admit of material measurement, such as a sensation of color, or an emotion of grief, and the whole theory falls to the ground at once.

When a given quantity of atomic motion in the gray surface of the brain is used up, its equivalent must appear in the form of some other atomic motion, and cannot have been a subjective feeling; otherwise it is idle to talk about any correlation and equivalence of forces in the case. There can be no relation of equivalence between a sorrowful feeling, and a motion of matter that can be expressed in terms of foot-pounds. You might as well talk about a crimson taste or an acid sound. When you weep, therefore, it is not grief, but the cerebrum, that acts upon the tear-glands. You say that the grief causes the tears, because you are conscious of the relation of sequence between the subjective emotion and the objective flow of tears, while you are totally unconscious of the molecular movements going on in the brain. But, in reality, the subjective emotion is something purely immaterial, or, if you choose to say so, spiritual, and its relation to what goes on in the brain is merely a relation of concomitance.

I have illustrated this point at disproportionate length, because it is both important and difficult. Until this point is perfectly clear in one's mind, any discussion of the alleged materialistic tendencies of modern philosophy is simply a waste of words. It is very clear that modern philosophy does show a decided tendency toward investigating what goes on in the

nervous system when we think and feel; and it is also clear that modern philosophy considers itself bound to study the nervous system as a material aggregate, with an atomic constitution, and subject to the same physical laws with other matter. I hope I have now made it equally clear that these tendencies of modern philosophy are just the reverse of materialistic. So far from maintaining, as materialism does, that psychical phenomena are interpretable in terms of matter and motion, this modern philosophy maintains that such phenomena are absolutely immaterial,—that they stand, as I said before, quite outside the circuit of physical causation. If the world were peopled with automata, if men had gone on from the beginning like puppets, eating, and drinking, and marrying, working and fighting, exactly as they have done, producing human history in all its details exactly as it has been produced, only without any consciousness, without any sentient life whatever, then materialism perhaps would afford a satisfactory explanation of the world. But the moment the first trace of conscious intelligence is introduced, we have a set of phenomena which materialism can in no wise account for. The latest and ripest philosophic speculation, therefore, as Professor Huxley once remarked to me, leaves the gulf between mind and matter quite as wide and impassable as it appeared in the time of Descartes.

But while materialism is thus more than ever discredited by the dominant philosophy of our time, and while it will no doubt continue to be more and more discredited with each future advance in philosophic speculation, I see no reason why there should not always be a certain amount of materialism current in the world. Very likely there will always be people who are color-blind, and people without an ear for music. So, doubtless, there will always be a class of excellent people with a fair capacity for understanding scientific generalizations, but without any head for philosophy; and this class will produce the Büchners and La Mettries of the future, as it has produced them in the past and present. Thus, one part of my question is disposed of. The philosophy of the future will not be materialistic, and there is nothing in the dominant philosophy of to-day to indicate that religious problems will not continue to be made the subjects of speculation. I recollect once asking Mr. Spencer's opinion on some question of pure ontology. He replied that he had no opinion; not because his mind was necessarily hostile to enter-

taining such questions, but simply because he was so entirely occupied in working out the theory of evolution, in its innumerable applications to the world of phenomena, that he had not time and strength left to expend on problems that are confessedly insoluble. This was the answer of a true man of science; and it is worth repeating for the benefit of those silly people who think it is not enough that Mr. Spencer should have made greater additions to the sum of human knowledge than have ever been made by any other man since the beginning of the world, and complain of him because he has not given us a complete and final system of theology into the bargain. But Mr. Spencer's answer further illustrates very well the philosophic attitude of the present age. The present age is occupied, above all things, in investigating the intimate constitution of the material universe, and tracing therefrom its past history and its future career. The conception of evolution is everywhere being substituted for that of creation; and this involves the most extensive and thorough change that has ever taken place in men's thoughts about the world they live in. For the present, this business absorbs all the most active and original minds, so that no time is left for metaphysical speculations. We are becoming wrapt in the study of origins, as the men of the thirteenth century were wrapt in the study of particulars and universals. But there is no likelihood that this will always be so. By and by all educated people will be evolutionists, and then it will be seen, more clearly than it is now, that while the doctrine of evolution has enormously increased our knowledge of the phenomenal universe, it really leaves all ultimate questions as much open for discussion as they ever were. It is Mr. Spencer himself who has said that every new physical problem leads at once to a metaphysical problem that we can neither solve nor elude. Solve it doubtless we cannot, elude it we also cannot, and so discuss it we will. Such, I presume, will be the course which philosophy will take where religious questions are concerned.

And now we are brought to the other part of my question. Will the time ever come again when men will be absorbed in questions of a transcendental or ontological character, as Aquinas and other great mediæval thinkers were absorbed? It seems to me quite possible that the interest in such matters may again become as intense, though not so exclusive, as it was in the Middle Ages. But if it be asked whether there can ever again be a theological

renaissance of such a character that men shall agree to surrender their right of private judgment on purely religious questions, and accept the teachings of any church, the reply must be that any renaissance of this sort is utterly impossible. The further question, whether unity of belief can ever be secured in any other way, is to be met by the assertion that unity of belief is no longer either possible or desirable. Such a statement as this is very startling, and more or less puzzling, to many people, as I have often had occasion to observe; and when the truth of it has come to be generally and thoroughly realized, it will probably be the greatest step in religious progress that has ever been accomplished. Once, we know, unity of belief was held to be of such supreme importance that the faintest whisper of dissent must be punished with torture and death. I have elsewhere sought to account, on historical grounds, for the existence of this persecuting spirit, as well as for its decline in modern times. In discussing "*The Philosophy of Persecution*,"* I showed how ancient society was pervaded by an intense feeling of corporate responsibility,—a feeling that the whole community was liable to be punished by the gods for the misdeeds of any one of its individual members. In early times this feeling of corporate responsibility, taken in connection with the barbaric theories of the universe then current, was the mainstay and support of priesthoods. And it was to the persistence of this feeling down through the Middle Ages that the horrors of religious persecution were chiefly due. In a second paper, on "*The Historic Genesis of Protestantism*,"† I showed that the feeling of corporate responsibility had its legitimate origin in the military necessities of primitive societies. In ages when there were no political aggregations of men larger than tribes, and when the relations between tribes were chiefly those of chronic warfare, a rude and savage discipline, in which the legal existence of the individual was virtually submerged in the interests of the tribe, was absolutely necessary. The feeling that the whole tribe was liable to be visited with defeat or famine or pestilence, on account of sacrilege committed by one of its members, was part and parcel of such a state of society. This feeling of corporate responsibility must have grown in strength through many ages by natural

* NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW, January, 1881.

† NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW, April, 1881.

selection, as those tribes in which it was most effectively developed must in general have shown the highest capacity for social organization, and must have exterminated or enslaved their neighbors. Having so long been favored by natural selection, the feeling of corporate responsibility for conduct and opinion became so deeply grounded in men's minds that it long survived the stage of social development in which it had its origin. Most conspicuous and terrible of the consequences of this deeply rooted feeling has been that fanatical craving for unity of belief in religious matters which has been the source of some of the worst evils that have afflicted mankind. But among the many changes which have affected the relations of the individual to the community, with the growth of great and complex modern societies, there has come the gradual substitution of the idea of individual responsibility for that of corporate responsibility. From this point of view, the Protestantism of Luther is significant mainly as a revolt against primeval notions of the relations of the individual to the community, which have long since survived their usefulness. Obviously, the disintegration of orthodoxies which characterizes the present age is simply the further development of the same protest in behalf of individual responsibility for opinion. And to those who take any interest in the present discussion, I hardly need argue that any revival of the methods of Catholicism could never occur, except as the concomitant of a wholly improbable retrogression of society toward the barbaric type. The very conception of an infallible church is so clearly a survival from primitive religious ideas, that to imagine such an institution presiding over the society of the future involves a most grotesque anachronism. Nevertheless, the uses of the Catholic Church are such that it is likely still to survive for a very long time, though with diminishing influence; and as it affords a refuge for such earnest and thoughtful souls as find the atmosphere of free discussion too bracing, it will probably long continue to receive accessions from the ranks of the various Protestant orthodoxies that are now so rapidly disintegrating.

With the fading away of the old notion of corporate responsibility for opinion, the value attached to unity of belief has greatly diminished, and attempts to secure such unity by violent means have become generally discredited. It is at last beginning to be apprehended that if unity of belief is to have any real value, it can only be when it is the result of the free working of

different minds. But unity of belief in religious matters is not very likely to be reached in any such way, for the conditions of the case are totally different from those of scientific discussion. The difference may be best appreciated by recalling the useful distinction drawn by positivism between science and metaphysics. According to positivism, the essential distinction between a scientific hypothesis, such as the undulatory theory of light, and a metaphysical hypothesis, such as the Leibnitzian theory of preëstablished harmony, is that the one admits of verification—whether by observation, experiment, or deduction—while the other does not. Or from another point of view, the one may be made a working hypothesis from which independent inquirers may arrive at mutually congruous results, while the other cannot. This distinction is one of the very few points made by positivism which have been generally adopted into modern philosophy; but the use which positivists have made of it is by no means philosophical. Comte himself set an inordinate value upon unity of belief, and in this his disciples have generally followed him; and the way in which they propose to secure such unity is simply to ignore all problems whatever in which scientific methods of demonstration are not accessible. This seems like paying an exorbitant price for a privilege of very doubtful value. But without following the positivists in this, we may admit the usefulness of their distinction between problems that transcend the limits of scientific demonstration and problems that lie within those limits. Clearly, if I hold one opinion concerning the passage of light through certain crystals, and my neighbor holds a different or contrary opinion, I am entitled to expect either that he can be brought to adopt my opinion, or that I can be brought to adopt his. Means of verification must exist; and even if the question cannot be settled to-day, we have no doubt that it can be settled by and by. But if I hold one opinion concerning the conscious existence of the soul after death, while my neighbor holds a contrary opinion, I am not entitled to expect that we can ever be brought to an agreement. For the question confessedly transcends the limits of scientific demonstration. Yet in spite of all that, one of our contrary opinions, and possibly both, may contain some adumbration of a truth. And more than a faint glimmering of truth we can hardly expect to be contained in any of our opinions on religious matters, for the problems are too vast when compared with our

means of dealing with them. Hence, instead of condemning variety of belief on such subjects, we should rather welcome each fresh suggestion as possibly containing some adumbration of a truth which we have hitherto overlooked.

And thus we arrive at last at the true lesson of Protestantism, which is simply this: that religious belief is something which in no way concerns society, but which concerns only the individual. In all other relations the individual is more or less responsible to society; but, as for his religious belief and his religious life, these are matters which lie solely between himself and his God. On such subjects no man may rightfully chide his neighbor, or call him foolish; for, in presence of the transcendent Reality, the foolishness of one man differs not much from the wisdom of another. When this lesson shall have been duly comprehended and taken to heart, I make no doubt that religious speculation will continue to go on; but such words as "infidelity" and "heresy," the present currency of which serves only to show how the remnants of primitive barbaric thought still cling to us and hamper our progress—such words will have become obsolete, and perhaps unintelligible, save to the philosophic student of history. In discussion conducted in such a mood there will, no doubt, be a great lack of finality. But the craving for finality is itself, in various degrees, an instinct of the uneducated man, of the child, of the savage, and perhaps of the brute. To feel that the last word has been said on any subject is not a desideratum with the true philosopher, who knows full well that the truth he announces to-day will open half a dozen questions where it settles one, and will presently be variously qualified, and at last absorbed in some wider and deeper truth. When all this shall have come to be realized, and shall have been made part and parcel of the daily mental habit of men, then our human treatment of religion will no longer be what it has too often been in the past,—a wretched squabble, fit only for the demons of Malebolge,—but it will have come to be like the sweet discourse of saints in Dante's Paradise.

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